

**Opening Statement, as prepared  
Chairman Henry Cuellar (D-TX)  
Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness and Response  
Committee on Homeland Security**

**Hearing - “FEMA’s Gulf Coast Rebuilding Efforts: The Path Forward”  
March 3, 2009 – 10am**

Today’s hearing is entitled, “FEMA’s Gulf Coast Rebuilding Efforts: The Path Forward.” It is an opportunity to examine how the lessons learned from past catastrophic incidents can be leveraged to help state and local governments navigate the Federal maze to enhance their capacity to recover from future large-scale incidents.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina barreled toward the gulf coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, and resulted in one of the largest natural disaster relief and recovery operations in United States history.

The public health concerns, environmental challenges, and communication failures have been well documented. But what is most seared in the minds of the public was the lack of preparation and response to assist the survivors of Hurricane Katrina and the slowness of the recovery.

Less than a month later, on September 24, 2005, Hurricane Rita slammed through parts of Louisiana and southeastern Texas and destroyed some coastal communities and caused more than \$10 billion in damages while leaving more than two million people without power and electricity. Several tornadoes from Hurricane Rita’s outer bands also damaged the State of Mississippi.

More than 3 years after the 2005 hurricanes, the Gulf Coast embarked upon another recovery effort in the wake of 2008 Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. With all of these storms, President George W. Bush issued a “major disaster” declaration, in accordance with the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, triggering assistance from the Federal government.

Today’s hearing will provide Members the opportunity to learn about the importance of the following: The need for creating a clear, implementable, and timely recovery plan; The application of public assistance to enhance state and local government capacity; The benefit of implementing strategies for business recovery; and, The importance of adopting a comprehensive approach to combating fraud, waste and abuse.

Let me welcome Mr. Stanley J. Czerwinski, Director of Strategic Issues at GAO who will explain how his examination of six (6) catastrophic incidents from 1989 through 2005 – ranging from the Loma Prieta earthquake in northern California to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the Gulf Coast – offer recovery lessons for the Gulf Coast region affected by Hurricanes Ike and Gustav and future disasters, generally.

Next, the Subcommittee will hear from Mr. David Garratt, Acting Deputy Administrator of FEMA. Mr. Garratt will explain the public assistance process, specifically as it relates to recent storms that have impacted the Gulf Coast. FEMA will also discuss how and why States differ in their drawing down of public assistance funds. FEMA will also discuss the possible impediments as well as opportunities for improvement in the recovery process.

Our third witness is Ms. Lyda Ann Thomas, the Mayor of the City of Galveston. Mayor Thomas will detail to this Committee the lessons that her city learned from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita as it struggles to recover from Hurricanes Ike and Gustav. She will offer her experience with the public assistance process and her recommendations to FEMA and other jurisdictions which may face a major disaster in the future.

Our final witness today is Ms. Amy Liu, the Deputy Director of the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institute. As someone who has been avidly monitoring the recovery of the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Ms. Liu will explain what she learned from her assessment of the Katrina recovery process and the lessons they hold for other jurisdictions.

As the Subcommittee receives the testimony from the panel, I want to note that I am very much looking for proposals from the witnesses that help to eliminate the culture of “us” versus “them.” The reality is that the impact of a terrorist attack or a major disaster is felt by all – regardless of one’s political party or whether you are a Federal official versus a state or local official.

Therefore, I look forward to testimony from our witnesses that highlight how we work together to improve the recovery process – not finger pointing. The people of the Gulf Coast region have been badly served. We should not allow inefficiency, bureaucracy, or scandals to further deprive the people of this region from a timely and an effective recovery process.

With that, I thank the witnesses for coming today and I look forward to a robust discussion centered on sound governance that promotes creative solutions and coordinated planning to rebuild a resilient Gulf Coast.